

**OK Appropriations Committee
Health Subcommittee
February 24, 2022**

**Public Hearing on:
House Bill 5037 AAC the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30th, 2023
(Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services)**

Good evening, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and members of the Appropriations Committee.

My name is Jennifer Brayman. I am a Norwich resident and employed as the Director of Quality Services for Reliance Health in Norwich, CT. Reliance Health is a nonprofit agency providing outpatient and community services to help individuals experiencing mental illness live successfully in the community. The agency currently employs approximately 250 people and serves over 750 individuals in Norwich and the surrounding area.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the state budget.

I want to thank you for the 4% Cost of Living Adjustment for community nonprofits that you fought to include in last year's budget. I'm here tonight to ask you to honor the long-term plan to address underfunding of community nonprofits and fund services by \$461 million over five years – or an additional 8% in Fiscal Year 2023.

Without it, we risk destabilizing our state's community service delivery system which has been upended by the pressures of COVID-19 and an exponential increase in the need for service in our communities. At the same time, we're facing unprecedented challenges recruiting and retaining staff of all skill levels and salaries.

Our agency has struggled to hire and keep employees due to the challenges we have faced during this pandemic. During this time, as Directors have been tasked with covering empty shifts, hiring and training new staff, our agency has also been expected by the State of Connecticut to implement new assessments and increase Targeted Case Management Services. Both of these initiatives involve extensive training and auditing which puts an added strain on Directors who are exhausted just trying to keep warm bodies in their programs to support individuals. Our staff have worked tirelessly to ensure that the individuals we serve feel supported and are doing their best to learn these new initiatives, but it is nearly impossible when staff burnout and turnover are at a high level. In addition, the staff that are expected to perform these functions could easily find a job making more money working at Target or a similar, lower skilled job.

Human services are now in competition for staff with private companies. Clinical staff are being lured away by lucrative offers from school districts and telehealth companies. Across the state, The Alliance found that 18%, nearly 1 in 5, nonprofit jobs are vacant right now.

As a behavioral health provider, your commitment to increase funding by \$461 million is needed now more than ever as we are seeing an increase in the need for mental health and addiction services. I have been encouraged to see the legislature's focus and attention on this crisis this year. But I want to be

clear: **There is no way to address the gaps in the mental health system without addressing the chronic underfunding of the existing services provided by nonprofits.**

The Governor's budget proposes several new programs for which we urge your support, including

- Expanding Mobile Crisis services to be available 24/7 using ARPA funding, which will be important especially as the state rolls out 9-8-8.
- 26 new community placements from CVH and Whiting
- Funding to place peer support specialists in Connecticut's 12 busiest hospitals. This will improve the connection to services of people who are hospitalized with a mental health crisis or who go to the emergency room. It is important to note, however, that this program will increase referrals to existing community programs, and increase in demand which is not funded in the proposed budget.

The Governor's proposed budget new behavioral health services and initiatives, for which we are supportive, but it does not provide support to existing programs that are struggling to keep up with the demand for services. **We urge the Appropriations Committee to fight for funding for these programs by implementing The Alliance's plan for a \$461 million increase.**

Behavioral health needs continue to increase, with providers seeing an unprecedented high volume of people in crisis as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc on communities.

Community nonprofits are ready and able to support people struggling with mental health – but we need your help to ensure that current services are available and accessible.

Thank you.

Jennifer Brayman

Director of Quality Services

Reliance Health

860-887-6536 x.233